

# House of Worship

## Song of the Plains

An austere elegant cathedral soars above the North Dakota prairie

BY CAROL FLAKE



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RUSSELL KAYE

THE TALL, DISTINCTIVE BELL TOWER of Gethsemane Episcopal Cathedral gleams like a beacon on the flat plains of Fargo, North Dakota, a place where long winters and harsh winds call for a strong counterforce of faith. Ethereal but sturdy, the tri-level tower suggests a grain elevator where a harvest of souls might be stored. Although the whitewashed board-and-batten structure is a startling departure from the traditional stone cathedrals of the Great Plains, there is a comforting familiarity to its outlines. And while Gethsemane

**KEEPING FAITH** The bell tower suggests a grain elevator, and the board-and-batten building, which includes offices and schoolrooms, a barn.

appears completely at home in its Dakota setting, it is also profoundly modern in conception and design—the result of a remarkable collaboration between a well-known, venturesome team of architects, Charles Moore and Arthur Andersson, and a congregation willing to take chances.

Gethsemane is actually a new incarnation of an older cathedral. When the original stone building in downtown Fargo caught fire in 1989, the congregation salvaged what it could. The pews, miraculously, had not been damaged, and portions of the stained-glass windows were still intact. A line from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* seemed to apply: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." It was difficult at first for the grieving congregation even to think about rebuilding, much less to consider that its cherished cathedral might rise in a new place and in a new and bolder form.

As the church members settled into temporary quarters in a warehouse-like building south of town, they soon came to realize how much their worship had depended on a special, sacred space. Gethsemane, they knew, wasn't

cut out to be a storefront kind of church. "It was claustrophobic," recalls Reverend Frank Clark, dean of the cathedral. "Our liturgy is very sensory, and light is very important to us. There is a sense of time of day and time of year and the kind of light that comes in. And we live in a latitude that is particularly sensitive to the length of day and changes in light."

Huddled in their harshly lit, makeshift church, the congregation made two key decisions. The first was to move to a tract on the prairie several miles south of downtown, near new sub-



**SAVING GRACE** A rich red canopy, which the architects call a “cloud cover,” arches over the nave. Gethsemane, dominated by skylights and scissors trusses, incorporates stained glass and pews salvaged from the old cathedral. A tiny, almost medieval chapel, right, beyond the sanctuary, opens on a cloistered courtyard.

divisions where most of Fargo’s growth was taking place. “That was a pretty wild idea,” says Marian Prior, who has served for decades in the educational work of the church. In recent years, a number of churches began to settle into the neighborhood, and that once lonely stretch of south Fargo now resembles a kind of campus of religious diversity.

The second major decision was to find an architect of consequence. “We wanted a building that would stand out,” says the dean. “We wanted architecture that fit the area, but we wanted it to be noticeable.” The church members also had to overcome the Episcopal bent for quiet decorum and do something bold and beautiful that would beckon potential new members. Just as important, though, they wanted to build a “church home,” as Prior puts it—a building in keeping with their vision of their mission and their identity

as a church and as a community.

Although no one had seen a building designed by Charles Moore and his younger partner, Arthur Andersson, who were based in Austin, Texas, they were impressed by the collaborative way their firm worked with clients. Somewhat frail, Moore (who died in 1993) was intrigued by the idea of building a cathedral from the ground up. As Moore’s health worsened, Andersson, who has family ties to the Dakotas, took over even more of the design process.

Moore’s penchant for whimsy and fractured classicism (evident in the Wonderwall at the 1984 New Orleans World’s Fair) was transmuted in Gethsemane by the dramatically somber setting of the Great Plains and by the collective dreams and ideas drawn from the congregation. “It was,” Andersson says, “a process of healing for the church and of discovery for us as archi-

itects.” During four months of workshops, he and Moore learned about the needs and leanings of the congregation. As the headquarters of the state diocese, the building would include offices for the bishop. As a school during the day, it would have to house several classrooms.

“They encouraged us to come up with our wildest ideas,” recalls Harry Hawken, who worked on the building committee. The need for storage space for chairs, for example, resulted in exterior buttresses that jut out from the great hall. There was a suggestion for a chapel for more intimate gatherings. As conceived by the architects, the tiny chapel, with its high walls and narrow space, hidden beyond the main sanctuary, has a particularly medieval feel, an impression reinforced by its opening onto a cloistered courtyard. Bright red-and-blue support beams offer potential pedestals for statuary when the budget allows. The courtyard, an unthinkable frill in North Dakota’s severe climate, was Moore’s most controversial suggestion to the planning committee, says Andersson. But the light it would afford



through large windows to adjoining rooms and walkways won over skeptical congregants.


During the design process, the architects constructed pull-apart models that church members could rearrange in various configurations. The bell tower, for example, kept shifting its position until it wound up above the entrance vesti-

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bule. There, as a prelude to the narthex, it suggests a comfortable balance between the formal worship space of the sanctuary to the right, and the more informal fellowship space of the great hall to the left. The sanctuary and the great hall are divided by transparent screens, a mere illusion of boundary, that can be retracted to extend the sanctuary for special occasions.

Church members like to refer to the style that resulted as “prairie Gothic.” The cathedral’s rather stark white exterior, which can take on an otherworldly lightness in the snow, contrasts with the substantial stone-colored walls of the interior, warmed by stained glass and other rich accents of color. Budget constraints dictated poured concrete blocks rather than real stone for inner walls and floors, although a subtle pinkish-gold tint added to the mix lends a soft glow to the surface, suggesting that worshippers are surrounded by buffed stone rather than mere concrete.

For accent as well as acoustics, the architects added a rich red canopy of painted gypsum wallboard, which they refer to as a “cloud cover,” stretched beneath the skylights, barnlike beams, and scissors trusses supporting the roof. Along the far end of the great hall is what Moore called a “memory palace,” decorated by stained-glass windows from the old church. New windows depict the church’s history, beginning with early meetings more than a century ago in a railroad car, the new building rising up as the latest stage in the saga.

Despite the austere elegance of its outlines, Gethsemane radiates a sense of warmth, of shelter from the storm, and food for the soul. It’s the kind of place that lifts your spirits. As Marian Prior says, “The biggest lesson that we got was that it doesn’t hurt to dream. This was a dream that worked. When I look at the church, I think, *This is who we are.*” For all its startling boldness, the cathedral suggests a building strongly rooted in the needs, experiences, and aspirations of its worshippers. 

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“House of Worship” is an occasional column. Carol Flake is the author of *Redemptorama: Culture, Politics, and the New Evangelicalism*.